WORRYING ABOUT GOD
Luke 10:38-42
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A western theologian was talking with a Vietnamese Buddhist Monk and came to the question most westerners ask in that situation. How was it possible for him, the Buddhist, to be so calm, so serene, so peaceful in the midst of harried, noisy, crowded, American cities. The Buddhist monk answered by way of a story. "A rider on a swiftly galloping horse sped d /n a country road, past a farmer working in his field. The farmer, startled, looked up from his hoeing and called out, 'Rider, where are you going?' The rider, looking back over his shoulder, shouted, 'I don't know. Ask the horse!' "This is your condition," the monk said to the theologian "You have lost control." (Attributed to Henri Nouwen)

Sometimes it seems like only the horse knows where he is going and we don't even have the reins in our hands any more. It feels sometimes like we are careening through weeks which become months which become years without any sense of where we are going and with a distinctly diminishing sense of who we are. One thing seems important and that is to keep the pace, to stay busy, to schedule our time as tightly as possible with activity - almost as if we think we can avoid the awareness of the big question if we consume all our time dealing with little problems.

Dr. Herbert Benson in his best selling book on coping with strees, The Relaxation Response, suggests that there are powerful dynamics beneath the conscious surface of our lives which work to upset our equilibrium, to keep us off balance, to create stress - to maintain us in a kind of permanent, low-level worry. Most of them, according to Dr. Benson, have to do with a loss of control over our own lives. He asks..."What psychological price do we pay in attempting to adjust to the knowledge that war or its immenence is with us everyday? Don't we subconsciously despair of the current nuclear weaponry that could exterminate every human being, indeed almost all life?

"Most of us find that we are hopeless in solving the big problems. We have some vague hope that the leaders we elect can find the solutions. Our frustrations come about because we generally can't even solve the less earthshaking problems, such as being on time to work in a large, congested city." (p. 16)

The first premise of this sermon is that each of us, at different levels to be sure, experience the sense that life is out of control. The second premise is that we worry a lot; that one of the things we do best is worry; that we can, some of us, spend a major portion of our time worrying about this and that.....about money, health, the success of an investment, our children's math grade, a professional goal; and that the wonderful multitude of things about which we worry are all related to the one big thing about which we need to worry. The third premise is that one of the ways we deal with it is by keeping busy, by scurrying about from activity to activity, breathlessly careening through life. Loss of control.....worry..... busyness.

The text of this sermon comes from a favorite Bible story, a brief vignette in the Gospel according to Luke. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, to the triumphal entry, the last supper, the cross. He stopped at the home of good friends, Martha, Mary, Lazarus. We know from a parallel text and source that the place was Bethany, a few miles outside the city. In John's Gospel Mary annoints the feet of Jesus with costly perfume and dries them with her hair. Martha serves dinner. In Luke 10, our text, Martha is the host. She received Jesus. She "worried about much serving." Luke tells it which means, I suppose, that she thought to dust the shelves, arrange the cooking implements neatly, plump the pillows, get fresh flowers and good wine,

and a special cut of meat, and nicer-than-ordinary-Tuesday evening clothes. It means, I suppose, that she did the welcoming with a little speech she practiced all day long so it would sound spontaneous and gracious. And she showed him where he would sleep and where this was and that was and where to sit and...would he care for some olives and some wine. And it means, I suppose, that - as soon as she managed a comfortable conversation group with her sister, Mary, and her brother, Lazarus, on each side of Jesus, she excused herself for a few moments to continue with the meal.

Here and now, I want to say hurray for Martha. She's the kind of person I want to visit. She or he is the person you simply must have on your committee or Session if you want to accomplish anything. I love the worriers of this world: they are the ones who prepare, who think about the possible outcomes and are ready for each. May their number increase! They chop the wood for tomorrow's fire today. They get the roast out of the freezer. While the rest of us are solving the problems of the world off in a corner they're making sure the glasses are full. While some are designing mission directions for the future of the church, they are raising the money to pay the fuel bill. God bless them.

I identify so much with Martha in this story I con't believe she said what Luke reports she said next. She complained to Jesus that Mary wasn't pulling her weight. Martha wouldn't do that; think it maybe, but say it out loud, to the guest - - never. I've always thought Luke didn't get it right. What Jesus said next is the point of the whole business, of course: "Martha, Martha! You are worried and troubled over so many things, but just one is needed." (TEV) That's the point.

The culture in which we live is absolutely enamored with busyness and, therefore, cultivates worrying as a way of life. Compulsive, relentless busyness is a product of a high-tech culture which, on the one hand has simplified a thousand necessary daily functions by means of machines to wash clother, zip us from place to place, process our words and puree our vegetables, while on the other hand convincing us that we are wasting time, missing something, if we are not actively doing things. I think it was James Thurber who said, tongue-in-cheek about our compulsive activity: "For God's sake, don't just do something, stand there."

Beneath the surface behavior which we find amusing is a value system that isn't funny at all. In fact, it is deadly serious and sometines just plain deadly. It's primary assertion is that the value of a human being is predicated on doing rather than being. Who a person is, and the value he or she has, is established on the basis of function. "What do you do?" we ask one another when what we really mean is "Tell me who you are." At the base of it all, there is a clear deliniation of personal value predicated on production, on doing, acting, not being. In behavioral terms it means being busy: busy at work, busy at play, busy at leisure, busy worrying all the time.

Professional people are particularly vulnerable to the syndrome. Without a whistle to begin and end the day, a clock to punch, or pieces to count, or a wall to build, professional people don't know how to stop working. I love the vignette about Winston Churchill laying bricks, in a wall, for the simple, profound joy of doing it, seeing the symetry, sensing the completion. After the wall grew to a certain size, it would be torn down, and Churchill would begin again. Clergy can be neurotic about busyness, about the fact that there is no beginning and no ending to the task, no product to sell, measure, weigh or inventory. Homemakers can work eighteen hours a day and worry the other six because there isn't enough time, ever, to get it all done.

Martha, I suppose, predicated her value, her sense of self, her salvation perhaps, on keeping busy, on getting the meal on the table, on time and hot. It didn't work for her, of course. It never does. In fact, there is a mounting body of evidence that compulsive worrying and hyper-activity are major health hazards. Herbert Benson, whose book I have cited, is Professor at Harvard Medical School. He believes we are in the midst of a hypertension epidemic and that we are killing ourselves with stress. Benson writes: "Whatever it may be - the daily commute, or the rising cost of living or the noise and fumes of the city, or unemployment, or random violence - we find it difficult to reach a satisfactory equilibrium, and as a result become the victims of stress...." (op. cit., p. 17) Benson and others conclude that the tremendous rise in heart disease is related to stress, and they have assembled impressive data to support their argument.

Even religion in our culture seems to follow suit. In our concern to do God's will, to follow Jesus Christ and to work for the Kingdom of peace and justice some of us become very, very busy. Some of us forget the gentle warning of Professor John Knox of Union Seminary that it's quite possible to lose your soul even while working for the coming of the Kingdom. Dutch Roman Catholic Henri Nouwen, in most of his writing, keeps reminding us, using the model of Jesus' own life, that the Christian adventure begins with our personal relationship with God. Nouwen observes hyperactive Americans, however, trying to stage-manage their encounter with the Almighty. His advice is simple - stop doing and be: stop talking and listen: stop serving dinner for a moment and sit quietly at the feet of the master. Nouwen's description of prayer continues to intrigue me. "Thinking about my own prayer, I realize how easily I make it into a little seminar with God during which I want to be useful by reading beautiful prayers, thinking profound thoughts and saying impressive words. I am obviously still worried about the grade.....Prayer is not a way of being busy with God. In fact, it unmasks the illusion of busyness, usefulness and indespensibility. Prayer is a way of being empty and useless in the presence of God." (The Living Reminder, p. 51)

There are, for all of us, occasions when we are taught that before we can speak or act, we must be. There are occasions when we are taught that instead of speaking or acting, our love and strength are better appropriated by our presence. We worry a lot about it, but what can you say to the parent of a dying child? On the way to the hospital in the car we become very anxious, but what can you do for a friend facing the valley of the shadow of death? Nothing. There is nothing you can say; nothing you should do. Bible verses and bouquets of flowers may be appropriate, but what is required is not your words or deeds but your being, your presence, your holding a hand, patting an arm, appropriating your concern, caring, love and power - not by some magic you can do or say but by your being. And there are occasions when we need to cease the activity, the endless talk, even the prayer talk, and simply be - in God's presence, to put the cups and plates down, the briefcase, the stethescope, the shovel, the car keys, the notebook - and sit at the feet of Jesus Christ.

There is a sense in which it is all related: all the busy worrying to that one thing about which we need to be concerned ultimately, yet which, very simply, is impervious to our busy worrying.

There is a sense in which all of us are caught up in the ageless process of denying our mortality, building our immortality, our future, our security; banking our money, memories, experiences, vocations, sexual conquests, business success as a hedge, a hope.

There is one thing, Martha. "What we really need, what we cry for, is something worthy and able to possess us," Professor Knox wrote,...."really possess us, possess our hearts." (Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 8, p. 198)

The ancient Psalmist put it magnificently:

"My soul longs, yea, faints
for the courts of the Lord:
My heart and flesh sing for joy
to the living God." (Psalm 84)

What we really need is something that will deliver us from our own propensity to worry ourselves to death. What we really need is something to save us from the demonic, destructive and never ending task of justifying, proving ourselves, positing our worth. The old theologians called it "salvation by works" and they were inclined to think that it caused a lot of trouble between God and his people. What we really need is to hear some Good News: namely that we are saved by grace; that we can stop worrying about God because he is worried about us; that our ultimate anxiety may be put to rest because the ultimate cares about us. It is what Mary seemed to know and what Martha had to learn. It is what most of us need, desperately, to hear, to believe.

The prayer has been attributed to St. Francis of Assissi.

"God, give us grace to accept with serenity,
the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things that should be changed,
and the wisdom to distinguish one from the other."

Reflecting on the prayer, American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote:

"Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone.
Therefore we are saved by love."
(see Justice and Mercy, Ursula M. Niebuhr, frontespiece)

That is the Good News. We are saved by love. God's love. And there is nothing to worry about, ultimately.

AMEN.

God of grace, we are grateful for your love and for the freedom from worry it allows us. Continue to teach us the grace of trusting you: in Jesus Christ Our Lord.

AMEN.